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**Title: *Corrosive Control: State-Corporate and Gendered Harm in Bordered Britain***

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**Abstract:**

As gendered discourses around migration proliferate, focus is often trained on experiences of women in interpersonal capacities, primarily regarding subjections to predominately male violence. Drawing from research in Britain and activist participation with women seeking asylum, this article expands this focus into the realm of state-corporate harms against women.

As previous research evidences (Author 2017), immigration law and policy often work to minimise autonomy at ground level, and dependence on spousal visas or housing/finances can exacerbate dependence on men, including violent men. This article argues that this punitive landscape of Britain's asylum system facilitates further violence against women seeking asylum, rather than ensuring protection. Moreover, harm is *inflicted* by the structures of coercive control set out by the state and its amorphous relations with corporations. Such structures are largely manufactured by the British state, but increasingly enacted by its corporate allies. These environments, I argue, mirror those of domestically violent perpetrators and work to gradually corrode women's autonomy and indeed sense of safety.

**Keywords:**

Asylum; refugees; domestic violence; women; state/corporate harm

## **Title: *Corrosive Control: State-Corporate and Gendered Harm in Bordered Britain***

*“For the people who need our help and protection the most, let Britain be a beacon of hope”.*

Former Prime Minister Theresa May, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2015 – previously British Home Secretary 2010-2016.

*“Everyone’s terrified, terrified of the Home Office. The Home Office is like a tyrant... so many people describe it as, it’s like torture”.*

Interviewee, asylum rights campaign co-ordinator in the North West of England, February 2017

### **Introduction: Confronting an Intersectional Continuum of Violence**

Legal and social discourses around migration and refugee status have gradually evolved to take fuller account of the rights of women seeking asylum (Author 2011 2014a 2016 2017; Crawley 2001; Girma et al. 2014; McKinnon 2016; Pickering, 2010). Concerted efforts have been made to recognise the gendered differentials in trajectories of violence and abuse that women and girls disproportionately face, specifically sexual and domestic violence. In more recent parliamentary and media campaigns in Britain, this has expanded to include sexual trafficking, domestic or ritualistic religious abuses (or so-called ‘honour’ violence) and the threat or impacts of female genital mutilation.

At surface level, the British state has been one such advocate of the eradication of such violence. For example, unlike many other European countries, the Home Office adopted a strategy to review asylum applications from a gender-sensitive perspective, implementing *Gender Issues in the Asylum Claim* Guidelines (Home Office, first introduced in 2010, updated 2018). Likewise, sexual trafficking has gained increased public and parliamentary condemnation with escalated efforts to control what has been termed a marker of “modern day slavery”<sup>1</sup> (for full discussion see Gadd and Broad 2018). With this in mind, it would serve to reason that the lives of women seeking asylum in the United Kingdom – in my research, Britain specifically – should thus have improved in correlation with such recognitions.

This article argues that the reality is to the contrary. As the landscape of immigration law and practice has become increasingly punitive (Aliverti 2012; Aas and Bosworth 2013; Bosworth and Turnbull, 2015), including toward those seeking sanctuary, the everyday lives of many women seeking asylum are transformed into an extension of control, degradation and in some cases violence. However, this article goes further still in harvesting empirical examples of instances where women’s safety or wellbeing – or both – can be compromised or diminished through actions and decisions made by the British state. It draws comparisons between the abusive behaviours attributed to domestic violence, and maps them onto experiences reported in empirical research. Overall, it highlights the increasingly amorphous relationship between states and corporations (Snider, 2003; Tombs 2016) in their roles related to border controls, and problematises the multifarious ways that coercive – and corrosive – controls can be enacted in the lives of women seeking asylum.

### ***Establishing a framework on ‘corrosive control’***

Before outlining the empirical arguments which underpin this article, I will firstly solidify a conceptual framework for identifying, naming and addressing *corrosive control*. In the context of gendered border harms, this combines two primary perspectives – intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Grzanka, 2014) and state-corporate harms and crime (Davis, 2003; Kramer and Micholowski,

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<sup>1</sup> One clear example is the implementation of the ‘National Referral Mechanism’ in July 2015, which is purportedly a ‘framework for identifying victims of human trafficking or modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support’ (National Crime Agency 2015).

2000; Lasslett, 2010; Tombs, 2016) - alongside definitions of domestic violence, coercive control, and corrosion.

The daily controls that those subjected to domestic violence experience are well documented but often simultaneously invisibilised: coercive control, sexual abuse and marital rape, or even the spectre of violence yet to come all work to regulate and demean. According to Women's Aid<sup>2</sup>, domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Financial abuse
- Harassment
- Stalking

(Women's Aid 2015, see also Walby and Towers, 2018)

Importantly, the British government moved toward strengthening controls around coercion in 2015, with the introduction of Section 76 in the Serious Crime Act 2015. This focuses explicitly on 'intimate or family relationships' and is a significant step in addressing violence within the domestic sphere, even opening out to (for example) parental abuse by children. As the Crown Prosecution Service point out, the Government definition<sup>3</sup> outlines the following:

"Coercive behaviour is an act or a pattern of acts of assault, threats, humiliation and intimidation or other abuse that is used to harm, punish, or frighten their victim; Controlling behaviour is a range of acts designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behaviour".

(Crown Prosecution Service, 2017).

There are clear and understandable reasons why this legislation has focussed on domestic and intimate relationships (Walby and Towers, 2018), not least because ten women per month are still killed in the UK where a male partner or former partner is the sole or primary suspect in causing her death (Ingala-Smith, 2016). However, and as the crux of this article emphasises, many of the behaviours identified above are ironically embedded or enacted in the lives of people seeking asylum. As will be evidenced throughout, this happens at both a structural level and through micro-level aggressions, in both the public sphere and in the home.

It is here that the dual concepts of state-corporate harm and intersectional feminism are employed to establish what is meant by *corrosive control*. At a fundamental level, the Oxford English Dictionary defines corrosion as "*the process of corroding or being corroded*" (Oxford English Dictionary), whilst the Cambridge English Dictionary defines corrosive as "*harmful and causing bad feeling*" (Cambridge English Dictionary). In the context of gendered border harms and for the purpose of this article, state-corporate harm and crime set out here relate more to state *facilitated* abuses than solely state *initiated* abuses (Kramer et al, 2002). That is, states develop harmful structures to contain and

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<sup>2</sup> I use Women's Aid's definition as it more accurately reflects the state-corporate nexus this article goes on to address in the lives of women's seeking asylum. Women's Aid is Women's Aid is a grassroots federation working together to provide life-saving services and build a future where domestic violence is not tolerated.

<sup>3</sup> For full legal definition, see Section 76, Serious Crime Act, 2015.

control migrant bodies, but corporations increasingly enact the policing, control and confinement of said bodies. This pattern is not new, and is increasingly echoed across continents (Boochani, 2018; Weber and Pickering, 2011). Building on work by Kramer et al (2002), Lasslett emphasises that many harms are inflicted outside of criminogenic actions, hence the emphasis here on state-corporate *harms* as well as crimes (Author, 2017; Lasslett, 2010).

Drawing then on intersectional feminism, we are able to identify the intersectional experiences of structural state-corporate harms in the context of corrosive control. As Asylum Aid argued in 2011 “asylum is not gender neutral”. This is not to say that men do not experience harms in seeking asylum, and far from it. Precarious work, exploitation and disproportionate confinement in prisons and immigration detention centres evidence otherwise (Bhatia 2015; Burnett and Whyte 2010). What this does mean, and which this article will demonstrate, is that women disproportionately experience intersectional oppressions which have very specific consequences. Whilst this relates to the trajectory of potential abuses in a single woman’s life, or indeed continuums of violence across women as a social demographic (Kelly 1988), it can still overlook the microcosms of harm which are themselves extensions of patriarchal controls (Cassidy et al, 2018).

As this article will go on to evidence, *corrosive control* is the banal, everyday stripping of autonomy and humanity that is acted out throughout the process of seeking asylum in the UK, entrenched in coercive interactions in an increasingly restrictive and controlling landscape. Coercive controls are grinding, banal and often enabled or directly initiated by states and their corporate allies. The impacts are gendered, intersectional and – for survivors of domestic or sexual violence – can extend or compound a continuum of violence in the lives of migrant women.

### **Methodology**

The broad arguments drawn out here stem from multiple projects over a ten year period. Primary empirical data included in this article are based on interviews across three periods: reflections from a decade of activist participation and ethnography with women seeking asylum in the North West of England<sup>4</sup> (2008-present – see O’Reilly, 2011); interviews with sexual violence counsellors, psychologists, social workers, medical doctors and general practitioners including a two year ongoing project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2008-2011; 2016-2017); and oral histories with women seeking asylum. Overall the ESRC project (2016-2018) incorporates 74 in-depth semi-structured interviews with psychologists, support workers, border agents, refugee rights activists and other such social actors working with people seeking asylum in Britain<sup>5</sup>, Denmark and Sweden. Twenty of these are in Britain, supplemented with over 500 hours of ethnographic activist research with women seeking asylum during this period. For the purposes of this article, only data from Britain is included so as to facilitate an in-depth, rigorous case study approach (see Flyberg, 2006).

Interview responses were coded using NVivo 8 and analysed from an interpretive perspective (Mason, 2002), read literally first and then deconstructed in relation to wider literature and the socio-structural and political context from which they responded. Analysis of parts of a woman’s oral history included in this article was more complex. Considering the number of recordings and depth and volume of data, linear structure first had to be re-constructed to read the history literally, before applying a dual interpretive analysis from myself and **Asma, a woman seeking asylum in the North West of England**. It is important to note, however, that themes were also informed by the longer-term participation with women seeking asylum, through which I was enabled to focus on aspects of

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<sup>4</sup> See Author, 2013; 2017 for further information on this aspect of work, activism and method.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the terms ‘Britain’ and the ‘United Kingdom’ are included in this article. The research area did not include Northern Ireland, but the UK is referred to when discussing aspects of border controls and asylum which affect Northern Ireland.

the process which can otherwise be invisibilised or determined as a 'by-product' of the asylum system.

The correlations between women's stories, interviews and organisations I have worked or volunteered with based in this area, supplemented with evidence from wider research such as the reports mentioned above, indicates a more concrete set of themes. These are then drawn out through lived experience of borders as projected through oral history with Asma collated between 2016-2018. In all, five long-term, in-depth oral histories were included in the ESRC project across the three countries (see Author 2019), although this article focuses on only one so as to give a linear account of the intricacies of internalised and everyday bordering (van Houtum and van Naerssen, 2002; Yuval-Davis et al, 2019). This methodological approach is not in itself representative of women's experiences more broadly. However, when used in conjunction with the multiple method approach taken throughout this research journey, oral history facilitates unique insight into the micro-level impacts of macro level policies, legislation and practice.

### **The Banality of Harm in Britain's Asylum System**

As with all countries bound to the Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 1951), the UK has a duty to consider applications for asylum based on well-founded fears of persecution as stipulated in the original Convention and its 1967 Protocols. Like all Northern European countries, the contemporary landscape of asylum in Britain has somewhat deviated from the origins of the Convention. Anti-immigration sentiment has perforated political and public discourse (Burnett 2016; Berry et al 2015), with the gradual escalation of hardened borders that promote illegalisation, criminalisation and – where possible – deportation, often in the place of humanitarianism (Andersson, 2014; Hasselberg, 2016; McMahon and Sigona, 2018; Webber, 2012).

What interests me here, however, is the way in which internalised borders in Britain work to reduce autonomy, social participation and overall wellbeing. People seeking asylum receive around £37 per week to buy food, clothes, transport. Travel can be a no-go since a bus ticket eats around two-thirds of the daily allowance, which (amongst other social activities) affects women's capacity to engage in sexual or domestic violence services.

For people whose application for refugee status has been refused and are submitting an appeal and do not receive legal aid, this £37 should cover said fees. The removal of legal aid for cases falling under *Article 8: the right to family life* of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was facilitated by the Immigration Act 2014, meaning people who are prohibited the right work are accountable to finance their own access to justice. The most recent quote I have seen for a solicitor to appeal a negative decision for such a case was £1,600 – around 44 weeks of saving, if you opt out of eating or travel altogether. Whilst this might seem an exaggerated comment to make, I have been told on numerous occasions by women and men that they pay by eating less. When I asked Asma how she planned to pay for her appeal, for example, she responded:

*Asma: "I don't get money but I have £10 ... or £20, I want to save, you know. I don't eat everything."*

*Author: "So if you have to pay solicitors' fees, do you eat less food?"*

*Asma: "Yes, of course. I don't buy shopping. Last year I was keeping money, I collect £200 from my money to save, like I pay my friend, 'Please can you do shopping for me and give me money please, I don't have money'<sup>6</sup>... But we have sacrifice for ourselves, we don't eat, we live hungry and eat less."*

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<sup>6</sup> Asma receives Section 4 support, which is basic support for 'failed asylum seekers' at the end of a claim, but who have not or cannot return to their country of origin. At the time of interview, this meant that her funds

Furthermore, housing – one of the most significant issues people face in the everyday – is usually in the poorest areas of the most deprived cities in the UK (Lyons and Duncan, 2017). Much of the responsibility of housing provision for people seeking asylum in Britain has been dispersed away from local councils to corporations which include G4S and Serco. In the North West of England, this has been the latter since December 2012 and according to Serco it is:

“responsible for the provision of accommodation, transport and related support services for asylum seekers in the North West of England and Scotland & Northern Ireland, being two of the six the COMPASS<sup>7</sup> regions. Serco is currently *caring*<sup>8</sup> for over 15,000 asylum seekers across these two regions”.

(Serco 2016; emphasis added)

In my experience of conversations and interviews with women seeking asylum, xenophobic and Islamophobic abuse is commonplace (Author 2017; see also Burnett, 2016). Housing conditions range from acceptable to dire, with heating problems, infestation (rats, slugs and cockroaches), and chronic damp and/or mould. Likewise, the threat of unlimited detention in one of the UK’s eight Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) is often at the forefront of people’s consciousness when they are required to sign at the Home Office<sup>9</sup>. Considering that the UK detained 27,300 people in such centres in 2017 alone (Silverman and Griffiths 2018), this is an understandable concern.

What emerges is a state with responsibilities to provide protection, but which structurally does so in a way which limits other aspects of social engagement, removing autonomy over daily decisions and facilitating unnecessary and often degrading struggles. As argued elsewhere, these not only have the capacity to negatively affect wellbeing broadly but, through the added pressures of temporal uncertainty, restrict any sense of security and thus can compound the impacts of previous experiences of trauma (Author 2016 2017).

### ***A Case of ‘The Domestic Controller’: When Protection Meets Subjection***

For Asma, domestic life had been complex prior to moving to the UK. As a child, she felt restricted by societal norms (which she acknowledges have now shifted in areas) but at the time meant she was dependent on male members of her family:

*“They don’t allow. By brothers and my father, they were very strict. They don’t allow girls to go easily like outside with friends or even friends’ homes.”*

Her marriage, an arrangement between her husband and her brother, was controlling and physically violent:

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were paid through the Azure card. This offered access to buying limited goods at one of six stores, but no cash. Therefore paying for legal aid was not possible, so she swapped her card funds for cash with friends.

<sup>7</sup> According to Parliament.UK, ‘Since 2012 accommodation has been provided to *asylum* seekers via six regional Commercial and Operational Managers Procuring *Asylum* Support Services contracts, known as COMPASS’ (2017).

<sup>8</sup> The idea that Serco’s role falls under the category of ‘care’ is an incredibly contentious one in the UK. The years 2016 and 2017 saw some devastating accusations of mismanagement and unacceptably low standards of accommodation, adding to a body of criticism which has already developed in light of sexual violence allegation against Serco staff in IRC Yarl’s Wood, the immigration detention facility for women.

<sup>9</sup> People seeking asylum are required to register on a regular basis with the Home Office. This may be weekly, bimonthly or, in rarer cases, less or more frequently than that.

*"he was beating me like that, you know the 7-Up Coke bottles, he throw them too much, beat me too much. Even he broke my phone as well, my computer, and even my clocks, he was ... they were very bad people, you know, even his mum, very bad, and they kill my ... another sister-in-law, his big brother's wife, they killed her".*

As Asma had known a close friend and a sister-in-law to be killed by family, she decided that a move with her husband to the United Kingdom (UK) would facilitate her leaving him in a way that would not be possible in her country of origin:

*"he was beating me a lot, he broke ... he was punch me, he ... this, my bone is broken [points to cheek, which has not fully healed]"*.

*"I had a husband who was beating me too much, and it was violence and my sister said, 'They are not good, why are you living there?' I said, 'I want to leave him but I can't leave in Pakistan 'cause they don't let women leave here'"*.

Having given one of the two names she uses, Asma's claim was refused after a period of three years. She was detained in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), became homeless on release, lived in a church for five years and has developed complex illnesses including diabetes, arthritis, recurring headaches from physical abuse, and depression. Having left her abusive husband, who accepted voluntary return to his country of origin, she gave birth to their first child. At the time of writing, Asma has spent more than ten years of her life in the British asylum system.

For Asma, domestic violence spanned across trajectories similar to those defined by Women's Aid, including instilling fear:

*Asma: "he [her husband] was teasing me, he was beating me as well. He beat me and he broke my this bone, so now it's painful for me, and the pain is spreading all my head as well. I'm very, very ... I went to the doctor, he gave me ... it's infection inside and he gave me."*

*Author: "It got infected as well?"*

*A: "Because it's broken inside. If you see, if you touch there –"*

*C: "Have they been able to do anything?"*

*A: "He would be punch me like that and my eyes was like black."*

*C: "Did he punch you often?"*

*A: "Yeah, he was beat me, he broke my clothes, he throw my phone in the wall. He destroy all the things like eggs, bread, everything put on the floor."*

*C: "Was he like that regularly?"*

*A: "No, any time, when he angry, when he got angry. Like very aggressive man. I was scared from him."*

Like Asma, many of the women I have spoken with claiming asylum in Britain, Denmark or Sweden have had some form of domestic violence which forms part of the asylum claim. However, as my research in this area expanded, one stark correlation gradually emerged both through ethnographic reflections and qualitative data: that similar patterns of control, regulation and threat are highly evident in the lives of women taking part in the research or who are involved in campaigns in which I participate. Inherent to the structures which prop up such abuses is the issue of dependence: financial support, emotional and familial ties, personal relations, love and the loss of a known future. The other side of dependence is fear – the threat of imminent or long-term violence, and the fear of what might happen were one to end such a partnership (Ingala-Smith 2016; Kelly et al 2014).



### ***Instilling Fear as a Mechanism for Control***

The politics of claiming asylum in Britain is deeply entrenched in dependence. From the moment of application, people are positioned to entrust the Home Office with their safety from persecution, and depend upon their interviewer to 'believe' their story and thus facilitate the granting of protection. Applicants are forcibly dependent on welfare since they are not entitled to work; on housing (unless they can provide their own, or can depend on other people for accommodation); and, through the policy of dispersal, are dependent on the Home Office to decide where they will even live, dependent also on the agreement of local councils who are part of the dispersal scheme.

The architecture of asylum in Britain also relies heavily on compliance, including opening up interpersonal experiences to scrutiny in the main (or *substantive*) interview, and weekly or monthly signings at the Home Office. These interactions cause many people immense amounts of anxiety or panic, as Asma highlights and as I have outlined elsewhere (Author et al 2017: 47-50). The key reasons for this are the fear of being detained or deported, and the heftiness of the potential outcomes of such interactions:

*"I was very scared when I go to Home Office because they can detain with children as well. Oh yeah, I feel very, very scared."*

As one mental health worker specialising in support for Black and Minority communities also argued:

*"I've seen people... You know how nervous we get when we go for a job interview? When you look at it this is something that their whole life depends on. If they are unsuccessful they could be sent back. I've seen men crying, women absolutely totally being – for weeks."*

A social worker – herself a refugee – held similar views:

*"This whole process can make you depressed. Some of them walk in fear, live in fear, you don't know where your case is, you don't know what's happening to your case. Always in fear and that affects you, doesn't it, has an impact on your mental health."*

Although specific to the use of asylum cases, the language of fear maps onto the kind of "unknowing" or unpredictability which is prevalent in domestic abuse cases since 'it is the everydayness of living with unpredictability which saps women's energy, depletes their sense of self and isolates them from others' (Stark 2007 in Kelly et al 2014: 7). **This relates particularly to the fear of transcending boundaries set by the controller.** To correlate with the asylum system, speaking in the Danish context, Zachary Whyte argues this form of power to be myoptic – a system of uncertain surveillance which is 'a different kind of power to that of Foucault's panoptic model, one that relies more on *uncertainty* than on accurately knowing or disciplining its subjects' (Whyte 2011, emphasis added).

Although the UK has stringent forms of surveillance which are more formalised in some senses, Whyte's concept of uncertainty remains relevant. An individual may never be detained or deported, and yet the spectre of these two potential realities often manifest more acutely as the meetings or interactions draw closer. As the Women's Refugee Commission (2016) point out, the constant feeling of uncertainty is compounded by increasingly restrictive asylum policies which facilitate removal or detention more easily and quickly (see Webber 2016). As such, and referring back to the mental health worker's comments above, anxiety is a central aspect of inducing compliance to avoid being "sent back" or detained.

From the offset then, the power relations between the person seeking protection and certain sectors of the state potentially providing it are not only uneven, but exude aspects of coercive power and control. Such forced dependency is in contrast with the concepts of freedom or civil liberties. Moreover, as I will now argue, combinations of abusive behaviour – as defined by Women’s Aid – are evident within the actions of the Home Office, some Home Office contractors, and private companies working on behalf of the Home Office to implement immigration controls.

### ***The Myth of Safety at ‘Home’***

As feminist scholars and activists have long argued, the home can represent a paradoxical site of safety and oppression for women, and survivors of domestic violence more broadly (Stanko, 1990). The pervasive notion of the public sphere as risky or unsafe for women can exacerbate an avoidance of *perceptively* risky spaces outside of the home (Fitzgibbon and Walklate, 2017; Stanko 1990; Westmarland, 2015). Although such fears can be logical extensions of the social construction of violence against women as public, it is predominately *within* the home within which women experience physical, sexual or coercive violence (Ingala-Smith 2016; Kelly et al 2014). The home thus sits at an uncomfortable nexus between the *perceived* likelihood of harm or violence, and the *statistical*<sup>10</sup> reality of it.

There are three dimensions to this paradox. Firstly, some women in domestically violent circumstances remain dependent on their relationship with their spouse under spousal visas. Indeed, she may fear fracturing of a family unit, or face the potential of leaving a violent partner on which her claim relies, and thus face the threat of deportation (Cassidy et al, 2018; Crawley, 2001; Safety 4 Sisters 2016). Secondly, a fear of Islamophobic, xenophobic and racist violence can encourage self-confinement in the home for women who have experienced verbal or physical abuses. Considering the increase in such violence, particularly since the exacerbation of anti-immigrant sentiment since the run up to the UK’s EU Referendum (Burnett 2016), this is not an illogical concern. As one women’s support worker in Scotland put it:

*“These dark, grey winter nights, if you don’t have access to cash, you’re on section 4 or if you are expected to be living in real poverty, even if you are on asylum support, you often have to walk throughout parts of [names city in Scotland] that I wouldn’t feel comfortable walking around, let alone if you’re a woman in a hijab or a woman of African origin in a very white neighbourhood.”<sup>11</sup>*

This context can thus leave women overly constricted to the domestic sphere in which other forms of oppression manifest, as we will soon see. Two examples stand out as illustrations – firstly, when in December 2015 a local organisation held a fundraiser, and almost none of the organisation I work with turned up. On probing, women told me they simply wouldn’t leave their house after dark which, in British winter, can be 4pm. On another, I arrived at a Darfuri Community Group<sup>12</sup> meeting to discuss women’s access to support in the aftermath of violence. I was the only woman, with 17 well-meaning Darfuri men. When I asked where the women were, one man joked that they were too busy with housework to attend.

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<sup>10</sup> I emphasise *statistical* here so as not to undermine the individual experiences of violence that many women do experience in public, which are of equal significance in understanding and challenging male violence against women.

<sup>11</sup> From my perspective, this should not be used to conflate so-called ‘white working class neighbourhoods’ as being singularly affected by Islamophobia or racism – after all, it is predominantly the upper-middle classes and political elite who define the mediated and legislative environments that promote exclusionary discourses.

<sup>12</sup> This was the name of a local group in the North West of England.

The third element to this “safety” paradox is that women who are subjected to domestic violence face exclusionary obstacles from support to leave abusive partners, and thus confinement stretches back to their current domestic sphere. Cuts to women’s services, particularly under the guise of austerity measures since the economic recession of 2008/2009, can have lethal impacts for women leaving violent partners. For women of colour, this can cut into racialised exclusions from mainstream services (Emejulu and Bassel 2017). For migrant women, specifically those who are undocumented or whose asylum claims have been refused, this is compounded by the reluctance for domestic refuges to accept women who have no recourse to public funds. As Sisters Uncut (2016) point out, in 2014 alone, 389 women fleeing domestic violence with ‘no recourse to public funds’ were turned away from refuge spaces. As one asylum social worker summarised, ‘Even if they are victims of domestic violence if they have got no leave to remain they cannot manage to get to women’s refuges because they don’t have recourse to public funds’.

### ***Corrosive Control: Extending Domestic Controls to Corporate Allies***

There are, however, further issues pertaining to the domestic sphere which stretch beyond the typical perception of the violent perpetrator. As discussed elsewhere (Author 2017), micro-levels of control are endemic in housing, with everything from suggestions on how to use the toilet to how to clean being given in information books. Perhaps more insidiously, some have also conflated minor wrong-doings such as leaving fire doors open with reasons to report tenants (also referred to as ‘clients’) to the Home Office – effectively making minor issues a deportable offence. Asma reflected on such controls, which perforated her feeling of content within her one-bedroom apartment. Not only did she have to report any trip away that was longer than seven days to Serco – which indicates the dispersal of social control beyond regular border agents (Cohen 1985) – but was continually chastised for any small changes or additions. She recalled, for example:

*“Even when my child was born, after five months I want to go London to see my sister. I was going out and he was coming in. He said, ‘Where are you going?’ I said, ‘I want to see my sister, to go London.’ ‘You are not allowed to go.”*

*Asma: “he does knock. If I’m no answer he just come inside, but I go and open if I am home. But if no answer, he come.”*

*Author: “And do you ever come back when he has been here while you were out?”*

*Asma: “I know he’s came here, because he just hit my light off.”*

*“He gave me so much stress again, he say, ‘Why did you put these two kettles?’ I said, ‘I told you so many times, every time you come to my home, you ask me about this two kettles. I told you, one is working and one is not working. That’s why I just boil the water and put another kettle, as a jug. I’m using as a jug. It’s not a kettle.”*

The gendered elements of these controls are no small issue for women dependent in such housing, particularly survivors of domestic violence who are rebuilding their ownership of space (see Kelly et al. 2014 for broader discussions). In one conversation, a woman told me of her humiliation when a male maintenance worker entered her apartment in initial accommodation without knocking before she was able to put on her hijab. In another, a support worker also stated: “There’d be times when I’d be sat in the flat with the women and a couple of guys would just walk in and go into one of their rooms without explanation of what they were doing, and I didn’t understand how that was in any way appropriate.”

For Asma, this insidiousness also transverses from control to threat of violence or, in Asma’s case, racist verbal abuse:

*“Even my manager is very bad, racist, all the time comment he gave me, he said, ‘Why are you people come in this country? You have to go back! Home Office come, soon this house will be empty.’”*

In another conversation, a young survivor of trafficking told me she could not escape constant phone calls from her housing officer who was upset that she was not present at her accommodation when he regularly visited. The reason was that she had been awarded a short-term fellowship in a local college and as such had to attend or lose her place. He resorted to leaving notes in her room, one of which he placed under her pillow – an invasive act which, under any other context, might be deemed stalking.

It is the combination of these elements so far - forced dependence, control, coercion and reductions in autonomy - which are ultimately corrosive powers. They chip at people’s personal freedoms, access to decision making and powers over the mechanisms of everyday life. Corrosive controls work to force compliance into the border regime more broadly and extend coercive controls in ways which mirror the actions, intentions and consequence of domestic violence perpetration. For some women, this is again made more complicated by relationships with perpetrators of domestic violence, creating a dualistically structural and interpersonal web of gendered controls which can grate at women’s well-being, autonomy and safety, both at the hands of violent partners and the hands of harmful state-corporate practice, as will now be further discussed.

### **The Coercive and Corrosive Manipulator**

As mentioned above, it is not legal for people to work whilst they seek asylum,<sup>13</sup> and dependence is on the Home Office and sub-contractors to (a) provide monetary welfare, (b) provide housing in a dispersal area, and (c) ensure protection whilst in the care of the state. It is key to note that – unless the person applying for asylum can financially manage independently – this is not a chosen dependence. Autonomy is almost wholly eradicated for decisions around where to live, what to do, or how to eat. Living in asylum accommodation, thus definably a domestic sphere, can mirror a feeling of invasion similar to what Stanko (1990) referred to as a part of everyday violence. As one support worker who worked with women living in temporary asylum accommodation put it:

*“They never seem to feel safe in those hostels, they never seem to feel that they were safe from the Home Office’s control, which if you’ve been through any sort of controlling relationship, an abusive partner ... it just seems that they were just repeating a lot of the characteristics of previous experiences.”*

Another alternative can be drawn from the lack of adequate housing available in areas that women live, as dispersal to more peripheral or areas unknown to the complainant are used to silence people coming forward with, as one refugee women’s sexual violence counsellor suggested:

*“If you complain about housing... rather than do something or help you within Liverpool, they say, ‘OK, you can go to Manchester then’. Had that happen.”*

This can extend to relationships with housing officers and maintenance repair. In numerous interviews, as well as my experience with visiting Asma and two other women’s homes, patterns emerged suggesting coercive elements of control. This meant women who relying on home repairs were threatened with being reported to the Home Office if they complained of either non-

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<sup>13</sup> With the exception of being granted specific permission. For further information, see UK Visas and Immigration (2014).

completion, or poor standards of housing/repairs. As a social worker for women seeking asylum argued:

*Participant: "They are being threatened with their cases, they say, 'I know your case owner and if you say anything...'"*

*Author: "What cause would women have to say anything about the officers?"*

*P: "Most of them, the cooker is not working for two months, you have to cook, you can't just be buying microwaveable, and you have kids in the house; the radiators, when it's winter it's so cold, so those are the things, the house is leaking, the toilet is broken, things like that."*

The outcome is silence: rather than push for acceptable standards of living, people are forced to live in potentially hazardous conditions or without adequate heating, lighting, cooking facilities (Perraudin, 2017). According to one national women's asylum rights campaigner:

*"women often say that they don't want to complain because they're worried about the impact it can have, they're worried about jeopardising... you know, what's going to happen in their case and certainly with the housing that's something... It's either they will complain and nothing will be done, it will take a really long time, or they'll just be worried about the impact of complaining."*

As Barton and Cooper (2012) show, this is indicative of other elements of social housing beyond only the asylum sector. The key disparity here is that complaints or negative interactions with housing officers can result in Home Office intervention, which people fear due to the inherent threat of detention or indeed deportation. This is not an exaggeration – people can be detained on the basis of one or more of thirteen reasons, with the thirteenth being 'your unacceptable character, conduct or associations' (asylum detention report, viewed by author).

For women seeking asylum, the continuum of sexualised violence can stretch into experiences from those accountable for their safety. In 2013, allegations of contemporary and historic cases of sexual abuse emerged in Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre. The Home Office deported four key witnesses, but later two inquiries were commissioned, the Review into the Welfare in Detention of Vulnerable Persons undertaken by former Prisons and Probation Ombudsperson Stephen Shaw, and the Serco-commissioned *Independent Investigation into Concerns about Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre* (see Bosworth 2016; Bhatia and Author 2016 for full discussions). Further reports emerged from research by Women for Refugee Women (W4RW), who found that women detainees were being subject to 'knock and walks', where male guards entered premises after knocking but not waiting for consent to enter, as well as watching women using showers and the toilet (Girma et al 2014). As a co-ordinator for a national refugee women's organisation argued:

*"Being locked up is incredibly harmful for anyone but in detention, for instance, there are particular experiences that women are disproportionately subject to. So one end of that spectrum is sexual abuse and exploitation in detention but also the kind of intrusions into women's privacy and dignity, women who very often experience forms of gender-based sexual violence in their countries of origin, then they come to the UK and in detention they find themselves being put on suicide watch and being watched by male guards."*

Whilst W4RW's most recent report (Lousley and Cope 2017) showed the depletion in this specific form of voyeuristic violence, interviews I have undertaken with practitioners working with women outside of detention raise serious concerns. This includes three occasions where support workers

indicated that female clients had been subject to offers of so-called 'transactional sex' in their asylum accommodation, where repairs would be undertaken in return for sexual 'favours'. Whilst two interviewees requested not to have details included in articles due to ongoing investigation, one argued that the fear of losing cases prevents women from coming forward with complaints of sexual harassment:

*"I think other women are more terrified that their case will get ruined and so have been silent and not forward. So I've heard it through another woman who said, 'Yes, I've heard of things like that happening.' But then that's it. We tried to get people to come forward to see if we could do a focus group of it but nobody wanted to speak out."*

Considering that unequal power relations facilitate both the perpetration of violence in the home, and the social silencing of women who may be subject to such exploitative conditions, it should come as no surprise that women may not wish to speak up against either the state or its corporate allies. Thus, there should be rational concern for the wellbeing of women set in this unequal relationship between dependence and safety or wellbeing in her home.

### **Conclusion: Corrosive Control and the Manipulation of Reality**

As this article demonstrates, patterns emerge which indicate that the Home Office and corporations working in co-operation hold an immense amount of structural power which transverses from the public into the private. On the other hand, the British state still holds obligations of protection toward those in fear of persecution. It is this contradictory disconnect which perhaps most embodies the capricious nature of contemporary Britain's approach to asylum, and which – like many perpetrators of domestic violence – most mirrors the inconstant, changeable and corrosive nature of its internal borders.

Rather than embed humanitarian protection, the structural architecture of the process of seeking asylum in Britain can inflict further harms. Whilst at the surface it embodies the ideals of welfare by providing financial support and housing, at the micro level it erodes human autonomy, infantilises adults, and enforces dependency. Complicity is the foundations of a relationship built on unequal power, and non-adherence to (often unclear) instructions or expectations bears punitive results from an increasingly authoritarian set of actors: state as well as corporate.

As discussed, domestic violence may be part of many refugee women's histories, but it is not one which is regularly considered a cause for international protection in and of itself. As McKinnon argues, this is connected to the reluctance to open avenues for increases in claims from women with similar experiences (McKinnon, 2016). However, the points raised throughout this article draw concerns beyond the legislative landscape of asylum practice or administrative policy. It evidences the ways in which everyday practices – decided in Parliament and by Home Office, often enacted by corporate allies – mirror the intentions and actions of perpetrators of domestic violence. Coercive control, a culture of threat and compliance, the potential for repercussions, and the uncertainty of safety in the home: all are reflective of definitions of domestic violence. They are also the key mechanisms of control adopted by the British state (including the Home Office and UK Visas and Immigration) and the corporations and policing bodies working on their behalf. For survivors of domestic violence, such controls contradict the freedoms that had been hoped for in the quest for sanctuary from persecutions elsewhere.

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